



2016
TALENT

Perspectives from Talent X: How to nurture the best in feature film talent

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Recommendations from TalentX 2016: Executive Summary Report

In March 2016, over 40 representatives from film funds and talent labs across Europe and beyond convened in Amsterdam for this year's 'TalentX' – the annual professional development forum which puts the spotlight on how feature film talent are nurtured and supported.

Over three days and joined by voices from across the film value chain, including sales, distribution, production, talent agents and filmmakers themselves, the group – representing 20 countries – uncovered and debated some of the critical challenges they face in paving the way for the emerging generation of writers, directors and producers in today's global market.

The discussion was wide-ranging and included anecdotal questions, opinions and conclusions garnered from a wealth of combined experience. From this, four core themes emerged and are highlighted below, to help inform and shape the way in which feature film talent may be best supported:

- **Re-thinking Expectations** – are we placing unfair or unrealistic measures on first-time filmmakers, to determine success or failure? When we switch our focus to the individual, rather than the project, we move away from being fixated on the potential 'red herring' of cinematic release as the ultimate goal.
- **Changing the Language** – are film funds perceived as bureaucrats, creatives or facilitators, and does the vocabulary of politics and markets distract from our core aims? Our language and methods must carry the filmmakers' artistic desire and urgency when we are discussing projects and ambitions.
- **Bursting the Bubble** – are we empowering filmmakers to survive in the 'real world', or creating a dependency trap? Focus must be on enabling talent to take responsibility and reach their own decisions, whilst supporting them to make informed choices about their work and ambition.
- **Reinventing the 'Microbudget Scheme'** – are such formats inspiring and enabling, or restricting and overprotecting for first-time filmmakers? This development tool could be better applied to filmmakers at various stages in their career and we must consider the impact on all members of the 'talent triangle'.

In summary, we need to: create less dependency but invest in development and empower individuals more; make fewer but better films; and take care of the creativity as much as the business and bureaucracy. In the words of one attendee, "We need to manage our systems but keep the talents running wild!" It is our combined responsibility to create a space in which this is possible – one where our measures are set by the desire to identify and develop very personal voices, and where success is about impact, not just outcome.

1) Re-thinking Success – are we placing unfair expectations on first-time filmmakers?

A strong question was put forth for film funds to collectively consider: are we making too many films, or are we making too many films with the expectation of distribution? This has particular resonance with first-time feature films, where the goal of distribution, especially cinematic, may be an unrealistic target and unfair measure of success, sometimes resulting in perceived 'failure' of the talent.

Moving to long-form content is usually a challenge on many levels, often regardless of the background and track record of the talent. When we switch our focus to the individual, rather than the project, there may be other success criteria that we can mutually identify and aim for, factoring these into the development process as part of the individual's and/or team's journey. This approach moves us from being focused on the potential

‘red herring’ of cinematic release as the only and ultimate goal at such an early stage – after all, even if cinematic release is achieved, we then judge on the wider market as box office performance comes into play.

Where public funding in particular is being deployed as an intervention to bring new voices through, this is perhaps one of the few opportunities a filmmaker may have to make ‘mistakes’. Yet film funds have a duty to be responsible with the money and time they invest into talent and projects, as well as ensuring that talent recognise the realities of the industry and market they are operating within, so a fine balance must be struck.

Perhaps looking at our own, sometimes bureaucratic, ‘key performance indicators’ is the starting point – when we set our own aims, are we simply basing them on the numbers of scripts developed and films that subsequently get made? Or can we also identify other steps and ambitions as part of the process that positively support and develop promising talent, preparing them for a broader range of creative and commercial considerations that they will encounter along the way, regardless of whether that target of successful distribution is reached? Just because a project may ‘fail’ in one sense, it does not mean that we should assume that the talent has failed in all others.

Success criteria and measures vary across organisations and countries, all of them taking into account their own values and cultures, so a single approach is unlikely – and probably neither feasible nor required. However empowering the talent developers within individual film funds and labs to recognize and define realistic success criteria to better support talent, is achievable. Self-reflection and having an ongoing dialogue with industry and talent is essential in setting realistic expectations for our intervention.

To do so, we need to ask honest questions of ourselves, for example:

- Is successful distribution an unrealistic expectation to place on a first-time feature maker? Is it unfair to measure the perceived success or failure of this first-timer solely on the market’s response?
- Are our success measures based on the desired targets and outputs of the fund, to the possible detriment of the talent, when identifying individual success criteria up-front is just as important?
- Have we kept the cinematic release alive as a ‘red herring’ of success, and are we creating too many films with the expectation of distribution?
- Are we developing the people, or the project – and which of them are we prioritizing?

2) Changing the Language – are film funds bureaucrats, creatives or facilitators?

In a world where film funds have to monitor and report on progress, the sometimes bureaucratic drivers behind this do not just influence the success measures we set, but they can also impact upon the language that we use when we are developing and supporting talent. We must also acknowledge that our ultimate aim is often to support the talent to a successful and sustainable career, and as such we must recognize the wider industry and its underlying commercial impetus within our discussions and feedback.

However, the language of business, markets, economy, growth and sustainability, and our focus on funds and performance indicators, can hinder or distract from our effectiveness in bringing talent through, especially when we become so immersed in this world that we have adopted its language without recognizing it as a potential barrier for others to jump.

Film is an emotional art form, communicating stories with real emotional impact. Both creative and commercial successes stem from the ability of the filmmakers to successfully engage and hold the attention of the audience – it is like telling something very important to someone right now, in the present moment. So our language and methods must carry that same artistic desire when we are discussing projects and ambitions.

As talent developers, we must remember that our work is about imaginative, creative people; people who will naturally rebel, challenge, fight, ponder, and so on. We are concerned not just with projects, but with personal growth and therefore the necessity to be flexible. Filmmakers should not feel that they are ‘reporting’ to us

when we meet, but that they are engaging in a balanced dialogue to which both parties are jointly and respectfully contributing, and where creativity is not stifled.

This may not mean a radical leap – for instance, using the word ‘audience’ instead of ‘market’ can bring more emotional resonance into the conversation, without diluting the commercial imperative to tell a story that people will pay to see. This changes the approach to one of ‘who is the writer or director telling this to?’

We cannot drop our responsibilities to manage, monitor and report on our public funds. However, we must recognise where the role of talent developer sits, the potential barrier it may represent (for example, as gatekeeper or funder) and our need to therefore communicate seamlessly with those on either side. We must speak bureaucracy with the bureaucrats, and talk creativity with the creatives.

Most importantly within this shift, we must remember the ‘power balance’ when we meet with talent, whether we are engaging with them as individuals or as teams. As a key decision-maker for a film fund, a talent developer holds perceived power and this can impact on the dynamic of the discussion. It is therefore essential to set out each other’s place in the project and agree how talent and developer will work together from the outset.

Again, some questioning of ourselves is needed, for example:

- Are we connecting emotionally through the conversation - or am I passing my bureaucracy and economic or commercial drivers on to the talent through my approach?
- Can I enter the discussion with my full power yet remain empathetic, using the language of the artistic, not of control?
- Can I run development meetings in such a way that the filmmakers feel they will gain insight and empowerment, rather than being asked to report?
- Are factors such as authenticity, originality, radicalism, emotion and aesthetics inherent within my thinking when I engage with talent?

3) Bursting the Bubble – are we empowering filmmakers, or creating a dependency trap?

Successful talent development is about empowering filmmakers to express their voice and vision, yet – especially in early stage careers - this can also be about nurturing and protecting, sometimes providing a buffer between talent and the hard commercial side of the film business. But is it possible to nurture, protect and empower at the same time, without creating a ‘bubble’ within which filmmakers continue or expect to exist? Too much nurture and protection will create dependency and even a sense of entitlement, whereas too much empowerment can lead to (potentially expensive) failure.

This dichotomy becomes especially poignant when bringing through new producers. How do we support them to become more independent in a business that struggles to find sustainable business models - and in some instances even struggles to identify how a sustainable model can actually be arrived at? The accessibility of film funds could also be considered to be encouraging a culture of ‘grantpreneurs’, that is to say people who become good at accessing public money or grants, rather than developing strong business skills or acumen.

We want to help talent make better films and we want to create more sustainable film businesses, but the key to both of these lies within the talent. It is about people, as individuals and teams, and producers especially have a critical role to play, but they need the right kind of support to gain the mixture of skills, knowledge, experience and contacts to survive and succeed in the ‘real world’ – the world outside of the bubble.

To find the balance, we need to make sure that the empowerment we give is focused on encouraging talent to take responsibility and make their own decisions, whilst the nurture and support we provide is focused on enabling them to reach informed choices about their work and ambition. This applies equally to writers, directors and producers, both as individuals and especially within teams.

For producers in particular, a vital part of their professional development is the ability to support the team dynamic, to create a safe space within which writer and director can find artistic creativity, and to keep the team going through all of the ensuing challenges that will arise. They need to be able to step forward and take visible responsibility for this, and to be supported, not undermined, by the talent developer or film fund in doing this.

If talent development – especially when linked to public film funds – keeps these principles at heart, then the harder to reach goal of sustainability may begin to take care of itself. To do this, we need to reality-check our own practices for dependency traps. For example, by asking:

- Do our methods enable the right balance of empowerment and support – and inclusion - for all members of the ‘talent triangle’, i.e. writers, directors and producers?
- Does our approach encourage and support filmmakers in making their own decisions, or are the choices hidden within the confines of a fixed programme?
- Are producers consistently allowed a voice in the development (and production) process, and respected as a core part of the team?
- Do we place a wall between the talent and the wider industry, or do we proactively encourage and support them in navigating the challenging and sometimes complex landscape?

4) Reinventing the ‘Microbudget Scheme’ – inspiring and enabling, or restricting and overprotecting?

Increasingly film funds and labs have adopted the micro or low budget feature film ‘scheme’ as a way to quickly hot-house new and emerging filmmaking talent – but is this, now widely adopted, format really fit for purpose and could it be better applied as a means of developing second or third time feature directors?

Many film funds and labs already run this type of intensive programme, have done so, or are seeking to. Typically aimed at first-time feature filmmakers, it has become regarded as both a means of discovery for talent on the cusp of breaking into features and a means of accessing a fixed amount of budget with a good chance of the film being developed - and potentially made - within an almost ready-made deal package.

Filmmaking teams usually ‘compete’ albeit within a collaborative environment, have a fixed amount of time, and a set of other pre-requisites or guidelines, often using a ‘knock-out’ principle, whereby at key phases of development teams pitch for the opportunity to continue with the programme, or to be dropped-off. For some, this can be an exhilarating, motivating and highly-focused way of working. For others, it can be restrictive, frustrating and too intense. Many probably sit somewhere in between.

In addition, such programmes are often overseen by a panel of executives from the funding organisations, who can expect to have some input into or control over various aspects of the projects, from editorial steer to decision-making on sales and distribution. This hands-on approach can lead us back to the aforementioned dichotomy of empowerment vs. dependency, but in an intensive – and sometimes rarefied – scenario where the producer can be more focused on pacifying the panel, than driving the team.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to development and while such programmes undoubtedly enable some talent to thrive, we must consider the broader implications for all members of the talent triangle. For example: do writers bear too much of the pressure, producing a script to a pre-determined framework on-demand?; is a first-time director equipped to meet the challenges of a restricted budget, with the loaded expectation of gaining distribution?; do new producers really benefit from working within such a controlled structure, which can give a limited – and sometimes very different - experience of development, negotiations, deals and time-frames than they will encounter in the ‘real world’?

Broader thinking may be needed to reconsider ways in which this development tool could be applied to maximise benefit and impact for filmmakers at various stages in their career, or for teams with mixed levels of experience. For example:

- Would a second or third time director benefit more from the challenge of a restricted budget? With the experience of a feature or two already behind them, this could be an effective means of honing a particular approach or switching genre.
 - Could a 'scheme' be better structured to benefit producers more by enabling them to take responsibility for decisions without the potential pressure or politics of keeping an additional tier of executives happy? Giving them more exposure to the sharp end of producing (under guidance but not control) will enhance skills that develop longer-term sustainability.
 - Do writer/directors gain more from this type of structured hot-housing than pure writers? The imposed timescale and framework may prove frustrating for writers who can feel that they are carrying the brunt of the work while director and sometimes producer appear to be 'waiting in the wings'.
 - Is a mixed-experienced team better suited to such formats, rather than taking through a team of two or three first-timers? Developing teams can be highly beneficial, but rarely would a first-time producer and director be working together on a feature film in the 'real world'.
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Want to Know More?

TalentX enables the sharing and exploration of established, successful talent development practices. Its goals are focused on creating and doing – shaping new approaches, attitudes and models for talent development across the public and private sectors. We look forward to continuing the dialogue into 2017 and building practical, ‘real world’ solutions and partnerships.

Visit creativeengland.co.uk/film/talentx for information and previous TalentX reports.

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